Co-operation in Practice - Members

In 2012 the Co-operative Federation of Victoria Ltd (Co-operatives Victoria), the Co-operative College in the UK and the SouthEast Housing Co-operative Ltd co-produced a series of short films on Co-operation in Practice featuring the then Chief Executive Officer and Principal of the Co-operative College Mervyn Wilson – Directors, Education, Governance, International, Members, Principles, Social Enterprises and Values. Filming was undertaken by Trade Creative. For each film the Co-operative College prepared a transcript.

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Co-operatives are member-based organisations. The fundamental principle is that membership is voluntary and open to all those who can use its services and accept the responsibilities of membership.

So what does that mean in practice? It means we need very clear and open processes whereby people can join the co-operative, it means that employees of the co-operative, whether they are housing co-operatives, whether they are consumer co-operatives, whether they are agricultural co-operatives, need to understand what membership is about and be able to speak to a customer and say why they should consider joining the co-operative.

I found a really interesting pamphlet in our Archive from the turn of the twentieth century that talked about the employee as a missioner for co-operation, and the pamphlet had a very, very simple argument. If the employee doesn't know and understand enough about co-operation to want to join his or herself, how on earth can they persuade the customer of the benefits of being a member of the co-operative as well? We need to ensure that our employees understand co-operatives, hopefully that they want to join and become active members of co-operatives in order that they can encourage their customers to do so, and they need to remember that the customers that do become the members are the owners of that business, and they need to be treated as such, encouraged to actually become more loyal members because trading loyalty for members is absolutely paramount to business success.

And that really takes us to another aspect of membership. Many co-operatives have built what we describe as mass membership, very large numbers of people in membership. It is important to actually consider what we mean by being an active and loyal member of the co-operative. We first of all want them to understand that they are members, not just customers. That means the co-operative has obligations to communicate with them, to make sure that they are receiving the right sort of information to enable them to take an active part and understand the obligations of being members. But we also need to recognise that not everybody has the time or desire to, for example, attend members meetings on a regular basis. So one of the things that we find that many co-operatives have done is communicate with their members to gauge what level of communication they want. For example, do you want just to receive an annual report and an update and details of your patronage benefits? Do you want to be regularly informed about social events and activities? Do you want to be regularly informed of formal meetings and where you can exercise democratic rights? Do you even

want to be considered for training towards becoming potential committee members? It is about getting more sophisticated about the relationship with members that enables active members to become more meaningful.

The other point to make though is that the most important activity that we want all members to do is to regularly and loyally support their co-operative through their financial transactions. If it is in a housing co-op, don't get into housing rental arrears; don't cause the co-op to have to spend money chasing you up. If you are in a consumer co-op, make sure that the co-op is your first choice, if you are an agricultural co-operative, make sure that you are marketing your produce through that co-operative, so trading loyalty is an absolutely key aspect of members.

Film available at CoOperationdg
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvnVDdQMYk112jAgJ-pvfFA